

MEMORANDUM

December 1, 2009

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Historic District Commission

SUBJECT: HDC2009-00481 602 Great Falls Road

Recommendation by Historic District Commission

The Historic District Commission (HDC) recommends historic district re-zoning for the property and house at 602 Great Falls Road through the City's Map Amendment process. The HDC noted that this is the oldest home (c1902) in a cluster associated with an African American kinship community that began in pre-Civil War Rockville, with the 1845 purchase of one acre of land by a free black woman named Ann Willson.

The HDC agreed that the property is significant under **Criterion I-C (Pattern of Events)** because it illustrates the development pattern of an African American kinship community; and for **Criterion I-D (Cultural Value)** because it is a rare example of the small scale vernacular housing associated with African Americans in Rockville; and for **Criterion II-A (Architecture)** because it is an intact example of vernacular housing characteristic of working-class residents in Rockville at the turn of the 20th century.

Evaluation of Historic Significance by the Historic District Commission

The Historic District Commission (HDC) considered the proposed Evaluation of Historic Significance at its November 19, 2009 meeting. The parcel (4,800 sf) is in the R-90 zone in West End, with a single-family residence on it known as the Bessie Hill House. A request for Historic Significance Evaluation of Property for Demolition was submitted by the owner on October 8, 2009, and brought to the HDC in accordance with Section 25.14.d.1.(c) of the Zoning Ordinance. The HDC evaluation is based on the adopted Criteria for Historic Designation (see page 3 below), and their review is restricted to historic considerations. The HDC does not consider building condition, costs for rehabilitation, or future proposed uses in this deliberation. The Historic District Commission, the Planning Commission and/or the Mayor and Council could consider such issues at a future date.

Background

Mr. Stevens and his nephew are co-owners of the property, following the death of Mr. Stevens' mother in 2006. His parents lived in this house since 1961, and he has maintained the property in these three years following her death. There are no family members who are interested in living in Rockville, and he would like to sell the property.

The property is located on an unnamed, dead-end alley located off the east side of Great Falls Road just to the south of Monument Street. The property is located behind 600 Great Falls Road and has no street frontage. Another property, 604 Great Falls Road, is located to the east of the subject property at the end of the alley. The two-story frame house was constructed circa 1902. The house is located within an African-American community founded in 1845 on Great Falls Road outside the town of Rockville.

The Great Falls Road settlement is identified as a resource within the adopted *Historic Resources Management Plan (HRMP)* under Historic Context 5: Development as Montgomery County Seat: 1825-1873.¹ In 1987, the subject property was included in the Maryland Historical Trust (MHT) inventory as the Bessie Hill House (M:26/24/2). The Bessie Hill House and the neighboring house at 600 Falls Road, known as the Johnson-Clarke House (M:26/24/1), are both included in the 1989 *Rockville Historic Building Catalog* as site #s 104 and 103.

Discussion by the Historic District Commission

A brief staff report was followed by owner and public comment. Mr. Stevens summarized his interest in selling the property. Ms. Sharyn Duffin, local resident and Bessie Hill's great-granddaughter, spoke in favor of historic designation on the basis of the significance of the free black kinship community. Peerless Rockville submitted a letter in support of designation.

The HDC acknowledged the property's cultural and historical significance, beginning with the pre-Civil War purchase of land by a free black woman, and continuing through six generations of her family at this location.

Discussion focused on "historic integrity," which is the ability of a property to convey its sense of time and place. In 1986, when original historic research was undertaken, replacement windows had already been installed. Between 1986 and 1989, when the property was included in the Historic Building Catalog (#104), vinyl siding was added over the existing wood siding. While the front porch has been enclosed, the original massing has been preserved.

The HDC unanimously agreed that the property was remarkable for the historic continuity of six generations of one African American family in this location, and that this house, the oldest one in the overall kinship community, continued to convey the historic sense of time and place, including its massing and design, materials (with wood siding beneath the vinyl), its alley location, the small scale lot and the associated small scale house, and its location in the remnants of the original African American kinship community.

Historic District Commission motion

On a motion by Commissioner Moloney, seconded by Commissioner van Balgooy and with Chair Hunt-McCool voting in favor, the Historic District Commission unanimously recommended historic district designation of the property at 602 Great Falls Road on the basis of Criterion I-C, I-D, and II-A.

¹ HRMP, p. 89.

HISTORIC DESIGNATION CRITERIA

The following checklist to used to assist in evaluating the significance of nominated properties. Standing structures and sites, including archaeological sites, must be determined to be significant in one or more of the following criteria to be found eligible for historic designation:

I. Historical and cultural significance:

- A. Event: the site of a significant historic event
- B. Person: identified with a person or a group of persons who influenced society
- C. Pattern of Events: exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historic heritage of the County and its communities
- D. Cultural Value: has character, interest, or value as part of the development, or cultural heritage of the City, County, State, Nation

II. Architectural and design significance:

- A. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction
- B. Represents the work of a master
- C. Possesses high artistic values
- D. Represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction
- E. Represents an established or familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or county due to its singular physical characteristic or landscape

Historic Integrity of structure and site:

Original site and setting largely preserved (lot size, environmental character, trees, setbacks, streetscape)

Outbuildings present and largely preserved

Original or near original condition (all changes reversible)

Minor alterations (porch removal or enclosure, roof material replacement, siding added over old siding, basic mass and fenestration intact)

Substantially Altered (basic shape, original façade plan, windows and doors have been obscured or changed)

Level of site significance: Local; State; National